DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 513 PS 027 566

AUTHOR Dickie, Jane R.; Eshleman, Amy K.; Borchers, Carrie S.; Hoff, Patty A.; Klimek, Jennifer L.; Nelson, Kristen L.

TITLE Children's Gendered Self-Perceptions: A Test of Social Role vs. Feminist Psychodynamic Theory.

PUB DATE 1999-04-00

NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Albuquerque, NM, April 15-18, 1999).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; Children; Fatherless Family; One Parent Family; Parent Child Relationship; Parent Influence; Path Analysis; Predictor Variables; *Self Concept; *Sex Differences; Theories

IDENTIFIERS Disciplinary Styles; Division of Labor (Household)

ABSTRACT

Chodorow's (1978) psychodynamic theory and Whiting's (1975) social role perspective yield different predictions with regard to the development of children's gendered self-perceptions. Chodorow's theory emphasizes the importance of children's progressive identification with same-sexed parents and gender asymmetry in parenting, whereas Whiting emphasized differential chore assignment within the family to explain girls' development of nurturance and boys' development of power. This study tested these theories in situations in which fathers are absent from the family. Participating was a racially diverse sample of children, ages 4 to 11 years. Subjects rated themselves, their mother, and father on nurturance and power, using illustrations of adjectives from the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Information was also collected on chores the children performed and the type of discipline administered. The findings indicated that children identified with both parents. Psychodynamic predictions were upheld when both parents were present, but when fathers were absent, mothers' nurturance predicted both daughters' and sons' self-perceptions as nurturing. For girls, the higher the frequency of nurturing chores, the more powerful they perceived themselves. The higher the frequency of agentic chores, the more nurturing they perceived themselves. For boys, agentic chores frequency correlated with self-perceptions of power. When fathers were absent, both boys and girls perceived themselves as more nurturing, and performed more agentic chores. With increasingly power-oriented discipline, girls' self-perceptions as powerful and nurturing decreased while boys' self-perceptions remained unchanged. (KB)

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Children's Gendered Self-Perceptions: A Test of Social Role vs. Feminist Psychodynamic Theory

(Keywords: Gender, Parental Influences, Self-Concept)

Jane R. Dickie[1]
Amy K. Eshleman, Carrie S. Borchers, Patty A. Hoff,
Jennifer L. Klimek and Kristen L. Nelson

Department of Psychology, Hope College
Holland, MI 49423

Presented at the 1999 Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting
Albuquerque, New Mexico

How do children develop their gendered self-perceptions? Chodorow's (1978) psychodynamic theory emphasized the importance of children's progressive identification with same-sexed parents and gender asymmetry in parenting to explain girls' development of nurturance (patient, warm, caring, empathetic, comforting and gentle) and boys' development of power (powerful, strong, judging, lawgiving, protecting and leading). Whiting's (1975) social role perspective postulated that the assignment of tasks (either nurturing or powerful) determined children's self-perceptions.

Situations in which fathers are absent give a unique opportunity to contrast Chodorow's theory with social-role theory. If Chodorow is correct, when fathers are absent, boys in particular will perceive themselves as less nurturing, however girls would continue to see themselves as nurturing. If, on the other hand, social-role theory is correct, both boys' and girls' whose fathers are absent may be needed to perform more helpful chores at home, and through these chores come to see themselves as more nurturing and powerful. When mother and father are both present, both social-role theory and Chodorow's theory would predict that mother's characteristics best predict girls' characteristics and father's characteristics best predict boys' characteristics.

A final test of Chodorow's theory is the extent to which events happening in the home such as style of discipline and performance of chores affects girls more strongly than boys because girls remain more connected to mother and home while boys seek separation.

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[1] Dickie@Hope.edu

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Methods

Ninety-four racially diverse children (ages 4-11) rated self, mother, and father on nurturance and power using illustrations of adjectives from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (1974). (See Drawing 1.) We also collected information on chores children performed (whether agentic – cleaning room, doing dishes, taking out trash -- or nurturing – watching younger children, taking care of pets) and discipline (whether power-oriented or not). Power oriented discipline included yelling, threatening and physical punishment.

Results, Conclusions, and Implications

Parents as Nurturing and Powerful. Children identified with both parents in their self-perceptions (See Table 1). Regression analyses showed that psychodynamic predictions of greater influence of mothers-on-daughters and fathers-on-sons was true when both parents were present, however, when fathers were absent, mother's nurturance predicted *both* daughters and sons self-perceptions as nurturing.

Chores. The *kind* of chores did not effect children's perceptions of themselves; the way the children *perceived* and *interpreted* these chores were important. For girls, the higher the frequency of nurturing chores, the more powerful they perceived themselves. The higher the frequency of agentic chores, the more nurturing girls perceived themselves. For boys, the agentic chores correlated with their self-perceptions of power. (See Table 2.) Regression analyses confirm these findings. (See figures 1 and 2.)

Father Absence. Using Father absence to contrast psychodynamic with social role theories revealed that social roles were more influential. When fathers were absent both boys and girls perceived themselves as more nurturing, and performed more agentic chores. Path analyses showed that father absence influenced children's sense of themselves through an increase in performance of agentic chores. (See figure 3.)

Discipline. Girls', more than boys', self-concepts and perceptions of their parents as powerful and nurturing were affected by power-oriented discipline. As the level of power-oriented discipline increased, girls' sense of themselves as powerful and nurturing decreased. In contrast, boys' sense of themselves remained unchanged. (See Figures 4 and 5; nurturance: $F(1,59) = 3.94$, $p < .05$; power: $F(1,59) = 4.72$, $p < .04$.)

Although our findings supported psychodynamic theories that same-sexed parents influence gendered development, our finding that other-sexed parents also affect feelings of nurturance and power challenges Chodorow's (1978) theory. For both chores and discipline, the

kind (agentic or nurturing; power or not) was not as important as the child's *interpretation*. Our findings suggest that children's self-perceptions are influenced by their perceptions of their parents, parental discipline, and chores assigned; however the impact of these experiences is modified by children's cognitive gender schemes. Here we see a possible interaction between psychodynamic, social learning and cognitive theories. Children first identify themselves as male or female then they interpret the tasks and roles they are given in terms of their fit with already developed gender schemes (Bem, 1992). It is in the context of father absence that children's chores take on real importance, and children accordingly interpret their chores as indications of their powerful and nurturant qualities.

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Gilligan, C., and G. Wiggins. (1988) "The origins of morality in early childhood relationships." In C. Gilligan, J. V. Ward, & J. M. Taylor (Eds.) Mapping the moral domain. Cambridge: Harvard UP.

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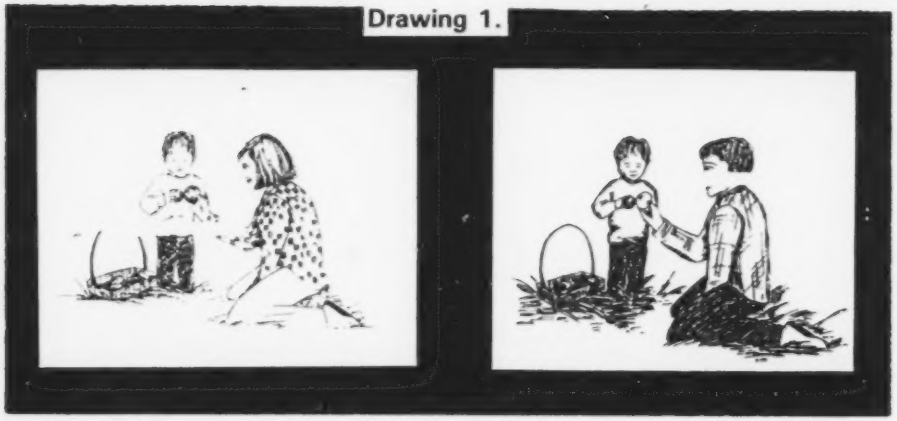
Drawing 1. Examples of pictures illustrating qualities of nurturance and power, taken from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (1974).

NURTURANCE

Here is a picture of caring. Are you like this?



Here is a picture of loving. Are you like this?

POWER

Here is a picture of power. Are you like this?

Here is a picture of punishing. Are you like this?

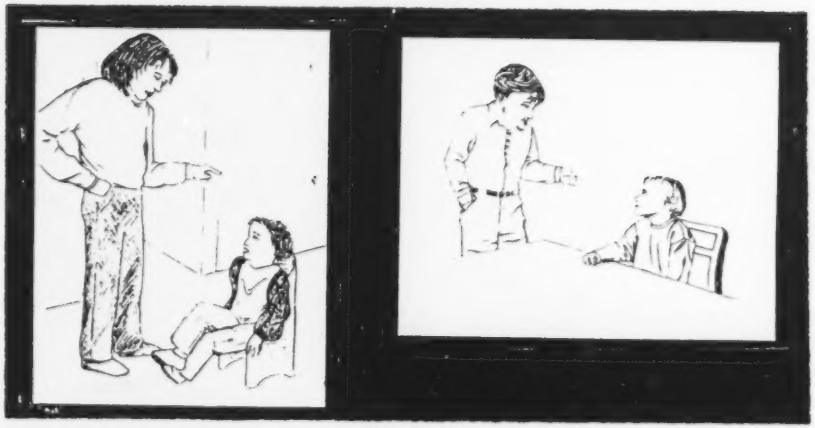


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Table 1 Children's Perceptions of Themselves and Their Parents

GIRLS N=42	Perception of Father		Perception of Mother	
	As Powerful	As Nurturing	As Powerful	As Nurturing
Self as Powerful	.57**	.36*	.64**	.53**
Self as Nurturing	.50**	.52**	.64*	.74**

*significant level = .05
**significant level = .01

BOYS N=43	Perception of Father		Perception of Mother	
	As Powerful	As Nurturing	As Powerful	As Nurturing
Self as Powerful	.44**	.53*	.41**	.44**
Self as Nurturing	.39**	.57**	.34*	.70**

*significant level = .05
**significant level = .01

Table 2 Children's Perceptions of Themselves and Frequencies of Chores

Girls N=42	Chores	
	Frequency of Agentic Chores	Frequency of nurturing chores
Self as powerful	.28	.36*
Self as nurturing	.33*	.27

* significant level = .05
**significant level = .01

Boys N=43	Chores	
	Frequency of Agentic Chores	Frequency of nurturing chores
Self as powerful	.40**	.11
Self as nurturing	.17	.06

* significant level = .05
**significant level = .01

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Figure 1. Regression analyses or the relationship between girls' and boys' age, type of chores performed and sense of themselves as nurturing.

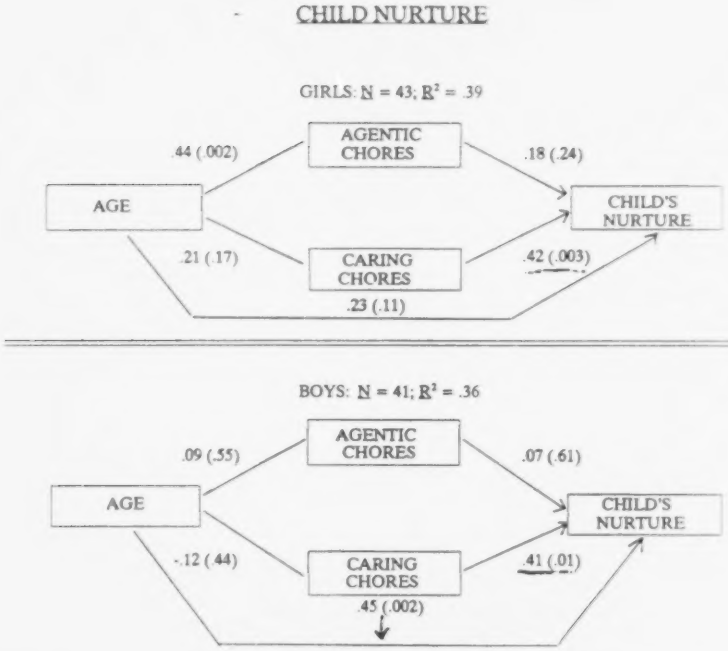

Figure 2. Regression analyses of the relationship between girls' and boys' age, type of chores performed and sense of themselves as powerful.

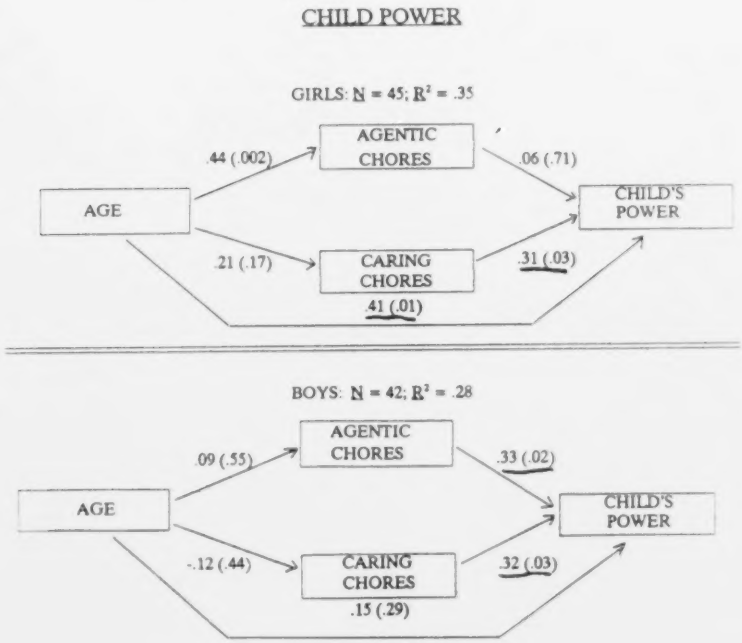

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Figure 3. Relatic ship between father absence, chores children perform and children's sense of themselves as powerful and nurturing.

When father not home, children feel more nurturing

$F(1,87) = 5.39$; $p = .02$

3.85 not home	3.25 home

When father not home, children feel more powerful

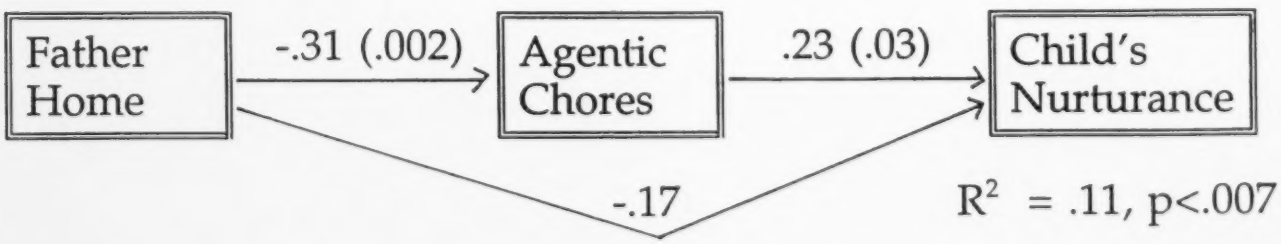
$F(1,90) = 3.04$; $p = .09$

3.03 not home	2.64 home

When father not home, children do more agentic chores

$F(1,90) = 10.04$; $p = .002$

14.07 not home	8.83 home



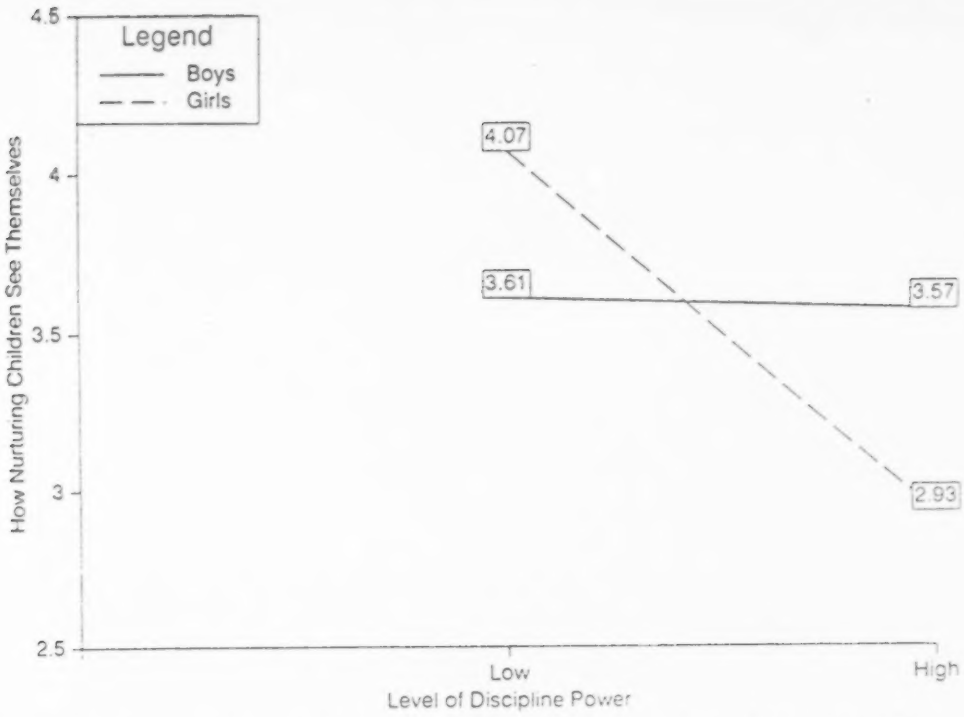


Figure 4 The relationship between level of power discipline and how nurturing boys and girls see themselves.

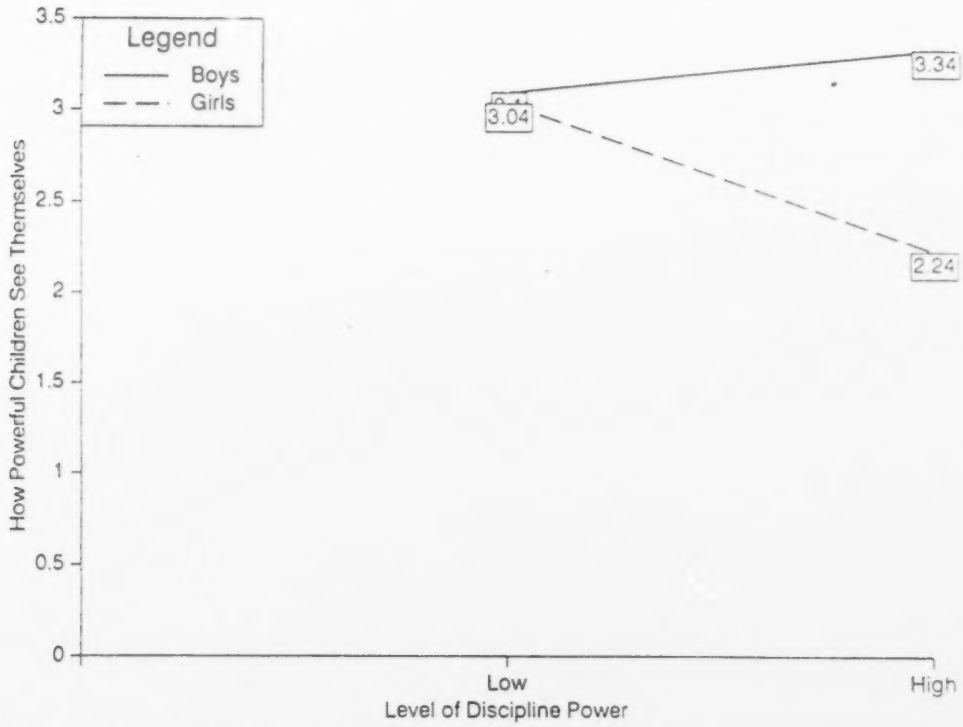


Figure 5 The relationship between level of power discipline and how powerful boys and girls see themselves.

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